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RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHPOD RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHMO #4730/01 2700328
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 270328Z SEP 07
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4171
INFO RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHVK/AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK 2436
RUEHYG/AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG 2722
RUEHLN/AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG 4555

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 004730

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: Party Time: Four Parties Hold Congresses in Moscow

Ref: Moscow 04599

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Summary

1. (SBU) Over the past week, four of the 15 registered political parties held their national congresses in Moscow to select their candidates for the December Duma elections. As in any election campaign they also attempted to engage an in electoral battle with their rivals. As press reports have noted, the two main leftist parties -- the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) and "For a Just Russia" (SR) -- as well as the smaller Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) have sought to attract a more diverse electorate by promoting candidates beyond the usual older, male party apparatchiks that have dominated political life here. The success of any or all of these parties in attracting voters beyond their core constituencies could change the shape of the future Duma on the margins, either by the weaker parties gaining enough support to cross the 7 percent threshold to be a part of the legislature or by helping to stop the Kremlin-backed United Russia (YR) from gaining a majority. END SUMMARY.

The Left

2. (SBU) The most contested political space is on the left, where the KPRF and SR are positioning themselves to take advantage of a perceived leftward shift in public attitudes. Neither party produced the media splash that LDPR's selection of Andrey Lugovoy had provided a week earlier (REFTEL), but presented well-orchestrated and largely predictable political theater to bolster their respective constituencies and attract uncommitted converts.

3. (SBU) The KPRF's congress on 23 September demonstrated the communists' continuing identity crisis. Is the party to continue as the inheritor of the "Party of Lenin" and its role as the advocate for those who have been disadvantaged in the new Russia? Or should it transform itself into a more modern social democratic party on the European model with the hope of attracting a younger, more prosperous electorate? Statements by longstanding chief, Gennadiy Zyuganov, hewed closer to the former with calls for nationalizing the strategic sectors of the economy, criticisms of continuing "counter-revolution," and a call to fight against "bureaucrats, oligarchs, and bandits." As in the past, there were signs of a split within the party; Duma deputy Oleg Smolin gave a speech in which he "presented for discussion" the idea that party could benefit from a shift in the national mood to the left, especially among the urban population, intellectuals, and young voters, by pursuing classic strategies of the European left (albeit with an eye

toward the Russian experience).

13. (SBU) The KPRF's cadre policies also demonstrated tension between the two approaches. On one hand, the party made much of its commitment to youth, placing at least six young activists at the top of regional party lists. Moreover, the party committed itself to paying special attention to large cities, where the leadership believes that it can attract more voters. On the other, the top three of the party list -- longstanding party chairman Genndiy Zyuganov, Nobel laureate Zhores Alferov, and former presidential candidate and "unaffiliated" agrarian Nikolay Kharitonov -- and the heads of the other 79 party lists reflected a traditional reliance on "seasoned" apparatchiks. The newspaper Gazeta noted that the average age of the KPRF congress delegate was 59 years.

14. (SBU) For its part, the Kremlin-authorized "For a Fair Russia" party (SR) used its cadre selections at party congress, also on September 23, to underscore its commitment to recruiting young, intellectual voters. As expected, the party leader, Sergey Mironov, will head the national candidate list, but in a surprise move, the party selected the leader of its youth wing, Sergey Shergunov, to serve in its troika. It also selected a former Communist and currently serving Duma deputy Svetlana GQyacheva. In a calculated move to raise interest, SR kept observers guessing until the last moment about the contents of its list.

15. (SBU) SR continued its efforts to claim the mantel of the left form the Communists. At the conference, it adopted the slogan "Socialism Version 3.0". Along with a younger candidate in the national troika, SR hopes to capture young voters who are not attracted to the Communists. The placement of a former communist not currently a member of SR in the troika indicates the party will fight hard for the left-wing vote.

The Right

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16. (SBU) The parties on the right continued to struggle for relevance, in part by using the same strategies of the left in promoting female, young, and intellectual candidates. The Union of Right Forces (SPS) held its party conference on September 21 and appointed party leader head, Nikita Belykh, to the top spot on its national troika. Boris Nemtsov, a long-time party activist, came out of semi-retirement to take the second spot in the list. In a surprise move, also apparently calculated to attract women voters, SPS included Marietta Chudakova as its third member. Chudakova made a name for herself as a scholar of Russian author Mikhail Bulgakov.

17. (SBU) Perhaps the only surprise from the SPS congress was the exclusion of Vladimir Ryzhkov, Duma deputy from Altay Kray, from the party lists. Rumors had suggested that he would be the third member of the troika for SPS. Press speculation suggests that the Kremlin objected to his inclusion on SPS's list. In public statements, however, SPS leaders have strongly asserted that they would not and did not submit their party lists to the Kremlin for approval.

18. (SBU) The new Kremlin-motivated right-center party, Civic Force (GS), held its party conference on September 23. It selected its two main faces, party leader Mikhail Barshchevskiy and his de facto lieutenant Aleksandr Ryavkin. Viktor Pokhmelkin switched his allegiance from SR to GS and quickly took the third slot in GS's national troika. Pokhmelkin moved to SR within the past two weeks. As a current Duma deputy and leader of a grass-roots drivers' political association, he brings experience and greater credibility to the GS ticket.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: This season, a number of candidates have switched parties in this electoral season. Aleksey Mitrofanov, previously high in LDPR now heads the SR list in Penza. Numerous other examples demonstrate the rather fluid divides between the current parties. Some of the changes appear designed to assure election. LDPR's success in December and continued existence have been brought into doubt by recent polling data. Pokhmelkin's dissatisfaction

with SR made his future with that party questionable.

¶10. (SBU) Despite the looming shadow of the more powerful and wealthy "party of power," United Russia (YR), the competition for uncommitted voters who plan to take part in the election will have an impact on the margins and could mean the difference between survival in the Duma and political extinction. (Polling by the Fund for Societal Opinion found that 21% of respondents who planned to vote in the Duma elections were undecided in mid-September. Nearly half, 48%, of respondents said they supported YR, 9% the KPRF, 7% for LDPR, and 6% for SR. On the right, SPS attracted the support of only 1% of respondents, GS virtually no support.) While everyone expects United Russia to win the most votes, an active battle to succeed in Russia's electoral environment appears to have taken shape and will have an impact on the margins in the character of the next Duma.

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